

INFORMATION FOR THE PRESS

United States Department of Agriculture

Release - Immediate

Washington, D.C., November 29, 1937.

PRESIDENT INCREASES AREA OF BIRD REFUGE IN FLORIDA

- - -

President Roosevelt has signed an Executive order providing for an addition of 31,445 acres to the U. S. Biological Survey's migratory bird refuge near St. Marks, in Jefferson, Taylor, and Wakulla Counties, Florida.

Originally a hundred-acre plot under Department of Commerce jurisdiction for lighthouse purposes, the St. Marks Migratory Bird Refuge under the present purchase program will be increased to 62,700 acres extending from the St. Marks River on the west, to the Aucilla River on the east, a distance of about 13 miles, providing an excellent winter haven for ducks, geese, upland game, and shore birds.

Established in October, 1931, the refuge was enlarged 4 years later by lands acquired by the Resettlement Administration for the Biological Survey's wildlife purposes. To date, title to about 20,565 acres of the new addition has been vested in the United States, although no public lands are involved in the recent order.

Site Is Historic

Once the home of the Seminole Indians, the refuge site is also one of historical interest. The first white men believed to have visited here were Cortez and his party, in 1520. In the southwestern part of the area may still be seen a well, supposedly dug by the Spaniards, about 12 feet deep, supplying yet today the best water obtainable on the refuge. South of this well are two mounds built by the Seminoles. Old pottery and arrowheads are still found near the mounds. Some years ago, the late Dr. J. B. Game, archeologist and one of

the first men to recognize the possibilities of St. Marks as a waterfowl sanctuary, planned to study these mounds but died before he could carry out his plans. On the southwest point of Lighthouse Island, a part of the refuge, stands the second oldest lighthouse in the United States, built in 1832.

Canada Goose Most Common Visitor

The land included in the recent addition is mostly grass-covered salt marsh, flat, and contains many small ponds and streams. Some parts are sand flats that make ideal resting places for geese. The remaining marsh land contains thousands of sloughs, bayous, and bays that afford optimum habitat conditions for certain species of ducks and geese. The interior lands of the refuge are chiefly palmetto and scrub flats inhabited by deer, in some sectors, and by other species of wild animal and bird life.

The Canada goose is the most common visitor to the region. It was estimated that more than 9,000 visited here last winter. Great numbers of ducks -- especially the lesser scaups, black ducks, mallards, and pintails -- and hundreds of gulls, terns, and shore birds remain on the refuge all winter. In lesser quantities are found quail, turkeys, mink, and raccoons.

C.C.C. Improve Refuge

In cooperation with a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, established a year ago, the Survey has done much development work on the refuge. Before this work was begun, extensive surveys over 20,000 acres of the area were made by the C. C. C. boys under supervision of the survey crew. Following this, several dykes and dams were completed, old roads were repaired, and lanes cut to reduce fire hazard -- a serious menace because of the heavy stand of timber on parts of the refuge -- and a patrol cabin constructed.

Plans are in effect to improve about 9,000 acres of fresh-water duck-ponds. This will necessitate the building of 9 additional miles of dykes, many flood-gates, water-control constructions, and dams. Other undertakings include clearing rights-of-way, clearing a site for a new refuge headquarters building, and the erection of several miles of telephone lines. In addition, the C. C. C. is building fences to eliminate unauthorized grazing and to prevent damage to dams and dykes by wild hogs; constructing 20 miles of truck and patrol trails; and erecting a 100-foot steel tower to replace existing towers nearer the coast, to serve as both a game and fire lookout.

Plans call for the immediate completion of 8 miles of combined dyke and roadway. The dyke will be raised to an elevation of 8 feet above mean low water-level, which averages from 2 to 6 feet above present ground-level. Other minor improvements are under way designed to benefit the birds and facilitate the administration of the area.